

Romanticism, the Spirit of the Century

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While Romanticism has long been associated with the names of a few key figures – Delacroix (1798-1863), Lamartine, Victor Hugo, Chassériau (1819-1856) – the diversity of its forms make it the expression of a profound change and of a new sensibility taking shape with regard to classicism. Indeed, this spirit suffusing the nineteenth century cannot be confined to a strict framework as its lifeblood was already latent in Neoclassical art : David (1748-1825) with his *Bonaparte Crossing the Alps* (1801) introduced Romantic ideals in the epic dimension of the hero bringing liberty to Italy in the midst of unbridled nature. His pupils, such as Girodet (1767-1824) (*Endymion*, 1791) or even, to some extent, Fabre (1766-1837) (*Saul and Ahimelech**, 1803, Room 22) would incorporate a supernatural and poetical dimension dear to Romanticism.

“Romanticism”, Baudelaire judged “is the most recent, the most contemporary expression of beauty”. In the constant search for modernity, Romanticism was also a vehicle in the quest for new sources of inspiration in order to sever links with past rules in terms of both form and subject. Perhaps even more than painting, literature would be the mainspring of this movement, offering a huge repertory of new worlds to explore : the Middle Ages were to become a favourite theme, borne along by the vogue for historical novels. Orientalism (Room 32) also contributed to the same quest for novelty “elsewhere”. Moreover, as illustrated by Chateaubriand, Stendhal or Benjamin Constant, the desire to plunge into the hinterland of the soul and human emotion in an inner voyage became an invitation for artists to probe the unknown depths of the spirit and the world as a platform for the expression of the untamed forces of nature.

Room Préault

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Romanticism
and Classicism

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References to History and Troubadour Art

The incredible success from the 1820s onward of the historical tales of Walter Scott (*Ivanhoe*, *Quentin Durward*) or Victor Hugo (*Notre-dame de Paris* and his play, *Cromwell*) paved the way for a huge movement that would flourish in the first half of the nineteenth century. The name “Romanticism” itself is etymologically derived from the genre of romances (French : romantique, from the obsolete romant) dealing with the Middle Ages (Madame de Staël). In any event, for artists Romanticism would open up a vast field of new subjects, tokens of national history easily identifiable to a wide audience, unlike classicism inspired by distant antiquity. The rediscovery of this picturesque past would fuel the artistic debates of the time ; conditioned by his socio-historical climate, no longer could man be represented as an ideal, eternal figure in the manner of classical humanism. The issues at stake foreshadowed the controversy that would surround social painting and naturalism around 1850.

Art and literature thus became closely bound : Monvoisin’s (1790-1870) *Death of Charles IX** was reworked by Dumas in *Queen Margot*, and Peyson’s (1807-1877) images of *Margaret of Anjou** were inspired by the *Tower of Nesle*, a drama by the same author. These episodes referred back to the end of the Middle Ages and the reign of the Valois in a dramatic vision of history that was a fitting medium for exacerbated portrayals of human passion.

A similar psychological truth is to be found in Cogniet (1794-1880) when he painted the *Massacre of the Innocents* in 1824 (fig.1). Favouring a fragmented, anecdotal take on the event rather than a broad descriptive composition, his *Study** revives the classical tradition of facial expressions of both horror and fright, while the piece’s violent theatricality is indicative of the new artistic considerations of the time.

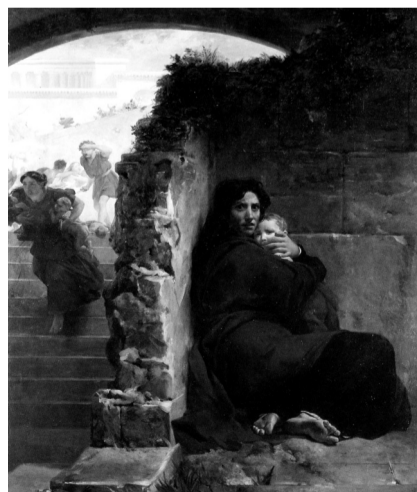


fig.1- Léon Cogniet
Massacre of the Innocents, 1824
Rennes, Musée des Beaux-Arts
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The *Birth of Henri IV**, a study by Devéria (1805-1865) for the painting in the Louvre (fig.2), offers a more positive historical vision heralding the fair government of the future sovereign, as opposed to the image of the depraved royalty of Charles IX and Catherine de' Medici. This brilliant piece of painting with its bright, luminous palette exalts the perennial nature of monarchical values as much as the Romantic aesthetic.

The fashion for depicting exemplary female figures nurtured this medieval trend, as in Delaroche's (1787-1856) *Joan of Arc in Prison*, 1824 (Rouen, Musée des Beaux-Arts) or Edouard Cibot's (1799-1877) *Anne Boleyn in the Tower of London* (1835) (fig.3), by reviving the old image of biblical heroines such as Susanna or Bathsheba. While the *Portrait of Clotilde de Surville** by Hillemacher (1818-1887) illustrates this tendency, it also leads to a vision tinged with sentimentalism depicting an artist torn between creativity and her maternal duties.

With his *Interior of an Underground Church**, Granet (1775-1849) offered a more picturesque and anecdotal Troubadour style quivering with Romanticism in its disturbing chiaroscuro and the morbid nature of the scene. As a forerunner to *Michelangelo in his Studio** by Delacroix (Room 32), in *Montaigne visiting Tasso** Granet depicts the saturnine figure of the great poet a prey to doubts about the creative act when face to face with the humanist philosopher.



fig.2- Eugène Devéria
Birth of Henri IV
Paris, Musée du Louvre
© RMN



fig.3- Edouard Cibot
Anne Boleyn in the Tower of London, 1835
Autun, Musée Rolin
© RMN

From Classical to Romantic Landscapes

An inquiry into the representation of reality as much as into painting itself, in the nineteenth century landscapes became one of the prime stakes in modernity. With the institution of the Prix de Rome for historical landscapes in 1816, the genre championed by Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes (1750-1819) would gain a more noble standing in the Academy's hierarchy. Michallon (1796-1822) (Room 24) was the first artist to win this prize, which would be maintained until 1863. Presented at the Salon in this category, Rémond's (1795-1875) *Death of Abel** sought to combine the classical leanings of Poussin and the aspirations of Romanticism: the violent, dramatic vision of the crime and the wild grandeur of the landscape with "Sublime" notes mark a break with the humanistic notions of seventeenth-century artists. Isabey* (1803-1886), a painter of seascapes, brought a powerful desire for naturalism to the tradition of Vernet (1714-1789). The portrayal of the conflict of the raging elements offers another vision of the grandeur of nature in the face of which man is powerless. The green nuances of the wave and the metallic glints of the froth add to the sense of the scene's desolation dominated by the imposing rocky outcrop.

Huet (1803-1869) was probably the finest embodiment of Romantic landscapes. Painting on the motif with very free brushstrokes, in the *Flooding of the Gave** he depicted familiar nature in the throes of cataclysm, the horizon clouded over with twilight. A reflection of the artist's inner emotions, this painting is the equivalent of psychological landscapes in literature.

The nineteenth century also saw the publication of a wealth of illustrated travelogues, the most famous of which being Baron Taylor and Charles Nodier's *Voyages pittoresques et romantiques dans l'ancienne France* (1821-78). These journeys across space and time offered a discovery of the national heritage, as well as interesting everyday scenes. In this way, Feroggio (1805-1888) – the *Donkey Fair** – or Garneray (1783-1857) – *Fishing for Shad** – reveal a picturesque and commonplace everyday scene, which through the workmanship involved also forms part of the endeavour for national development and the quest for modern subjects. A more topographical approach is apparent in Richard's (1782-1859) *View of the Chateau of Pau** and in Danvin's (1802-1842) *View of the Banks of the Seine**. Yet while both painters were seeking a new reality, the latter was also coloured by Nicolas Poussin whose hometown he depicted with atmospheric effects and tonalities reminiscent of the seventeenth-century Dutch style.